

The Power of Common Assessments

One of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning available to schools is the creation of frequent, common, high-quality formative assessments by teachers who are working collaboratively to help a group of students develop agreed-upon knowledge and skills (Fullan, 2005a; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Reeves, 2004; Schmoker, 2003; Stiggins, 2005). Such assessments serve a distinctly different purpose than the state and provincial tests that have become the norm in North America, and we draw from the work of Rick Stiggins (2002, 2005) to clarify the differences.

State and provincial tests are summative assessments: attempts to determine if students have met intended standards by a specified deadline. They are assessments of learning, typically measuring many things infrequently. They can provide helpful information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of curricula and programs in a district, school, or department, and they often serve as a means of promoting institutional accountability. The infrequency of these end-of-process measurements, however, limits their effectiveness in providing the timely feedback that guides teacher practice and student learning.

Formative assessments are assessments *for* learning that measure a few things frequently. These timely in-process measurements can inform teachers individually and collectively regarding the effectiveness of their practice. Furthermore, these teacher-made assessments identify which students have learned each skill and which have not, so that those who are experiencing difficulty can be provided with additional time and support for learning. When done well, they advance and motivate, rather than merely check on student learning. The clearly defined goals and descriptive feedback to students provide them with specific insights regarding how to improve, and the growth they experience helps build their confidence as learners (Stiggins, 2002). These timely team assessments, when combined with classroom teachers' skillful ongoing assessment of student proficiency in precise skills on a daily basis, create a powerful synergy for learning.

Doug Reeves (2000) uses an analogy to draw a sharp distinction between summative and formative assessments, comparing the former to an autopsy and the latter to a physical examination. A summative test, like an autopsy, can provide useful information that explains why the patient has failed, but the information comes too late, at least from the patient's perspective. A formative assessment, like a physical examination, can provide both the physician and the patient with timely information regarding the patient's well-being and can help in prescribing antidotes to help an ailing person or to assist a healthy patient in becoming even stronger.

Common, team-developed formative assessments are such a powerful tool in school improvement that, once again, no team of teachers should be allowed to

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Formative
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* Schedule
the teacher



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opt out of creating them. Schools can use a variety of assessments: those developed by individual teachers, a state or provincial test, district tests, national tests, tests that accompany textbooks, and so on. But school leaders should never allow the presence of these other assessments to be an excuse for ignoring the need for common, team-made formative assessments for the following reasons:

1. **Common assessments are more efficient than assessments created by individual teachers.** If all students are expected to demonstrate the same knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to which they are assigned, it only makes sense that teachers would work together to assess student learning. For example, four third-grade teachers will assess their students on four reading skills during a unit. It would be more efficient for each teacher to develop activities or questions for one skill and present them to teammates for review for inclusion on the common assessment than for each teacher to work separately, duplicating the effort of his or her colleagues. It is ineffective and inefficient for teachers to operate as independent subcontractors who are stationed in proximity to others, yet work in isolation. Those who are called upon to complete the same task benefit by pooling their efforts.

2. **Common assessments are more equitable for students.** When schools utilize common assessments they are more likely to:

- Ensure that students have access to the same essential curriculum
- Use common pacing
- Assess the quality of student work according to the same standards

It is ironic that schools and districts often pride themselves in the fair and consistent application of rules and policies while at the same time ignoring the tremendous inequities in the opportunities students are given to learn and the criteria by which their learning is assessed. Schools will continue to have difficulty helping all students achieve high standards if the teachers within them cannot develop the capacity to define a standard with specificity and assess it with consistency.

3. **Common assessments represent the most effective strategy for determining whether the guaranteed curriculum is being taught and, more importantly, learned.** Doug Reeves (2004) refers to common, teacher-made formative assessments as the “best practice in assessment” (p. 71) and the “gold standard in educational accountability” (p. 114) because they promote consistency in expectations and provide timely, accurate, and specific feedback to both students and teachers. Perhaps most importantly, teachers’ active engagement in the development of the assessment leads them to accept greater accountability for the results.



4. **Common assessments inform the practice of individual teachers.** Tests constructed by an individual teacher generate plenty of data (mean, mode, median, percentage of failing students, and so on), but they do little to inform the teacher's practice by identifying strengths and weaknesses in his or her teaching. Common assessments provide teachers with a basis of comparison as they learn, skill by skill, how the performance of their students is similar to and different from the other students who took the assessment. With this information, a teacher can seek assistance from teammates on areas of concern and can share strategies and ideas on skills in which his or her students excelled.
5. **Common assessments build a team's capacity to improve its program.** When collaborative teams of teachers have the opportunity to examine indicators of the achievement of all students in their course or grade level and track those indicators over time, they are able to identify and address problem areas in their program. Their collective analysis can lead to new curriculum, pacing, materials, and instructional strategies designed to strengthen the academic program they offer.
6. **Common assessments facilitate a systematic, collective response to students who are experiencing difficulty.** Common assessments help identify a group of students who need additional time and support to ensure their learning. Because the students are identified at the same time and because they need help with the same specific skills that have been addressed on the common assessment, the team and school are in a position to create a timely, systematic program of intervention. We will address this topic in detail in the next chapter.

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Of course the most effective teachers are constantly assessing student learning. Multiple times each day they will check for student understanding, use precise assessments, and engage students in reviewing their own comprehension and progress. This ongoing, daily assessment is crucial to good teaching and can serve as a powerful motivator for students, and we endorse it whole-heartedly. We are certainly not suggesting that common formative assessments take the place of this continuous monitoring. There will be times, however, that assessments become more formal, and we think there are compelling reasons that at least some of those formal assessments be developed by the team rather than by the individual teacher.

One of the most important factors in student learning is the quality of the teaching they receive (Haycock, 1998; Marzano, 2003; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). And the “most immediate and direct influence on teaching expertise is the workplace of the school itself” (Saphier, 2005, p. 220). As Jonathan Saphier (2005) goes on to say:

The reason Professional Learning Communities increase student learning is that they produce more good teaching by more teachers more of the time. Put simply, PLC improves teaching, which improves student results, especially for the least advantaged of students. (p. 23)

Teachers in a PLC work together collaboratively in constant, deep collective inquiry into the questions, “What is it our students must learn?” and “How will we know when they have learned it?” The dialogue generated from these questions results in the academic focus, collective commitments, and productive professional relationships that enhance learning for teachers and students alike. School leaders cannot waffle on this issue. Working with colleagues on these questions is an ongoing professional responsibility from which no teacher should be exempt.

Part Four

Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey

The PLC Continuum

Working individually and quietly, review the continuum of a school’s progress on the PLC journey (on pages 60 and 61). Which point on the continuum gives the most accurate description of the current reality of your school or district? Be prepared to support your assessment with evidence and anecdotes.

